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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002118

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: GUL'S CANDIDACY MET WITH RESIGNATION AND  
SUPPORT

REF: ANKARA 2084

Classified By: CHARGE NANCY MCELDOWNEY for reasons 1.4(b),(d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment. Most Turks have accepted FM Abdullah's Gul's presidential candidacy (reftel) with either enthusiasm or resignation. The military is silently absorbing the blow that their earlier efforts to derail a Gul presidency crashed and burned. Leftist parties are in disarray, while other opposition leaders are keeping a respectful distance. The business community is generally supportive, at least publicly, although markets have dropped sharply since Gul's announcement. The generally supportive trend is likely to continue, if only to avoid further destabilizing tensions, but with a watchful edge; Gul (and Erdogan) must follow through on promises to represent all Turks and uphold the basic principles of Turkey's secular republic. Suspensions remain, but Gul's popularity and AKP's election victory are potent forces. Gul will be carefully watched, with many ready to exploit any misstep. If he can demonstrate his independence from Erdogan and his commitment to strengthening Turkey's democracy for all Turks, he may prove his doubters wrong. End Summary and Comment.

PM ENDORSES GUL

¶2. (SBU) After weeks of evasive responses, PM Erdogan clearly endorsed Gul's candidacy at an August 15 press conference. Calling Gul an ideal leader with the experience, charisma and prestige to serve as Turkey's president, Erdogan stressed that Gul understands the president's constitutional duties and would represent all Turks equally. He indicated that the new government and president would work together to achieve a strong and prosperous Turkey.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

¶3. (SBU) Gul is making the rounds to build support and give the appearance of consultation. He met with labor unions and business groups on August 15, generally receiving support. Stressing the importance of stability, several business leaders endorsed Gul's candidacy as a reflection of Turkey's democratic process. Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD) Chairman Arzuhan Yalcindag found reassuring Gul's pledge to uphold the constitution and represent all Turks equally, but added that the business community will be watching his actions closely. Turkish Exporters' Assembly President Oguz Satıcı told the press Gul would be a statesman as president, just as he had proven to be serving as foreign minister and, briefly, as prime minister in 2002.

¶4. (SBU) Word of Gul's candidacy late on August 13 was followed by a sharp depreciation of the lira and drop in the Istanbul stock market. The dollar gained 6.77% against the

lira from the opening of the markets on August 14 to mid-day on August 16, and the ISEM index was down 10.15%. This coincided with increasing financial market turbulence worldwide. While it is impossible to say how much of this fall was precipitated by Gul's candidacy, it may have been an additional reason for jittery investment managers to reduce their exposure to Turkey.

#### POLITICAL PARTIES MIXED

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15. (SBU) Opposition parties were mixed. The pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) leaders said they have no bias against Gul but would consult DTP members before taking a position. The leftist Republican People's Party (CHP), after refusing to meet Gul, issued a memorandum August 15 outlining why the party opposes Gul's presidency. They argued Gul failed to consult before announcing his candidacy, is against the Republic's basic values, his presidency would threaten the future of the regime, and his election would serve as revenge against the democratic republic. Nationalist Action Party (MHP) officials repeated their intent to attend the presidential voting, but also to field an as yet unnamed MHP candidate against Gul. Democratic Left Party (DSP) leader Zeki Sezer met with Gul but indicated DSP had preferred a consensus approach and would cooperate with CHP in boycotting the voting sessions.

#### MILITARY BITTER BUT RESIGNED

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16. (C) Military contacts note the atmosphere at Turkish General Staff (TGS) is grim but admit their options are limited. Prior to Gul's announcement, retired former CHOD General Ozkok made a rare public statement that a headscarf in the presidential palace would send an inappropriate image

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of Turkey to the world. Since Gul's August 14 press conference, the TGS and retired military community have been silent. As one military contact indicated, the next few months will be telling. The TGS will be watching carefully as the government and Gul pursue constitutional reforms or other measures that might, in their view, undermine the secular republic.

#### THE (NON)ISSUE OF MRS. GUL'S HEADSCARF

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17. (C) Military contacts have denied Mrs. Gul's headscarf is the issue, stressing they are more concerned about someone of Gul's Islamic background wielding presidential powers. CHP leader Deniz Baykal also claimed the headscarf was irrelevant to larger concerns about Gul himself. Not all agree: On August 15, mainstream daily Radikal asked, "Is Turkey Ready for a Headscarf-wearing First Lady?" reporting that "no one wants to say it out loud, but the basic problem with Gul is that his wife wears the Islamic headscarf." Whether Gul-related or not, following Gul's announcement the TGS shifted the annual August 30 Victory Day celebration from an officers' club (where it has been held since 1983) to the more formal Land Forces Command Base, which has a strict dress code prohibiting headscarves. Gul has firmly defended his wife's right to cover her head as a freedom protected by Turkey's constitution. "It is me, not my wife, who is running for president," Gul told the press.

#### A STATESMAN'S PRESIDENCY

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18. (C) Gul as president will present a new face for Turkey. As foreign minister, Gul was able to forge relationships with leaders around the world; his candidacy was warmly received by foreign officials in Europe and elsewhere. MFA contacts believe having the former foreign minister as president will help advance Turkey's foreign policy agenda. New AKP deputy and former AKP Ankara provincial chairman Nurettin Akman envisioned a president and prime minister working in harmony abroad, particularly with the EU and Central Asian countries. At the same time, Gul will need to prove his independence

from Erdogan -- partly to emerge from Erdogan's shadow, and partly to rebut opponents itching to show that Gul is still Erdogan's man.

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